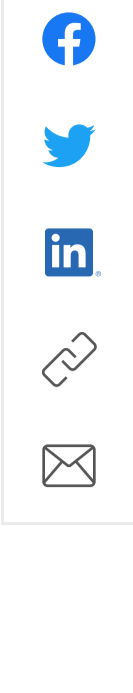


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## 'Manhattan Phoenix' Review: From Grit to Greatness

Was the Great Fire of 1835, which reduced the Lower East Side to ashes, the catalyst for the explosive development of Manhattan?



Manhattan engraving circa 1867. PHOTO: SEPIA TIMES/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

By *Edward Kosner*  
Jan. 25, 2022 6:24 pm ET

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If you think today's Manhattan has little in common with the tight little island of two centuries or so ago, you may have to think again.

In the early to mid-1800s Manhattan emerged as the financial and mercantile hub of America. The top 1% controlled a third of the city's wealth. In 1856 Walt Whitman observed that, except for the poorest, New Yorkers were addicted to "occupying houses outrageously and absurdly too expensive." The great American poet—along with Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe—was then helping to make New York the literary capital of the country.

It was already the capital of the performing arts. The Philharmonic had been founded in 1842, and the theaters that lined the Broadway of the time boasted the brightest stars west of London, including Junius Brutus Booth, John Wilkes's father. By 1850 Columbia and New York University, along with the New York Yacht Club, the Racket (as it was spelled then) Club and the Century, were already established although (except for NYU) based further downtown than they are today. Manhattan's rectangular street grid, proposed in 1811, was fully designed but just starting to be imposed.

The streets could be filthy and rats ran rampant. Traffic was so bad that shoppers needed escorts to cross Broadway safely. Yellow fever and cholera were the Covid of the era. Successive waves of the deadly plagues shut offices, workshops, stores and theaters. Hospitals were overrun. Thousands of those who could afford to escape the fetid city fled to rustic retreats like the marshy Rockaways. Anticipating a 21st-century New York politician, in 1854 the scandal-tainted Fernando Wood proclaimed: "The People will elect me Mayor though I should commit a murder in my family between [now] and the Election."

The eventful saga of how this pocket metropolis of perhaps 250,000 souls underwent a profound growth spurt in the early 1800s that transformed New York into mighty Gotham is told in Daniel S. Levy's fascinating "Manhattan Phoenix: The Great Fire of 1835 and the Emergence of Modern New York." It's one of the best books about old New York I've come across.

There were countless differences, of course, between Manhattan then and now. Five decades after the British abandoned the city, a Protestant elite ruled politics, business, the arts, and the social whirl of extravagant balls and costume parties. Negroes (who were banned from trains, ferries, dance halls, billiard rooms and museums), most Jews and the detested Irish immigrants scrambled for places at the margins. Manhattan's main fire alarm was a bell in the City Hall cupola tolled by a watchman who scanned the low skyline for licks of flame.

Manhattan in those days was New York, unaffiliated with the other boroughs until 1898—an island, the author writes, "of ponds and streams, winding roads, small towns, and local markets." Mr. Levy's concept—that the conflagration that in 1835 turned the bustling Lower East Side into the "Burnt District" was the spark for the explosive development of the island—may be arguable; the opening of the Erie Canal a decade earlier certainly played a part. No matter, his book is actually a sparkling social history of the borough in its adolescence. It's filled with lively anecdotes and intriguing factoids—for one, that the name of genteel Gramercy Park is a corruption of the Dutch *krom moerasje*, or "crooked little swamp."

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He covers everything from the Astors (the richest family in town) to grave robbing (\$2 or \$3 a cadaver for doctors and medical students to dissect) to sewage disposal (hardly salubrious) to corrupt Tammany Hall boss William M. Tweed (and his "40 Thieves"). There's no padding—admirably, every sentence conveys a fact, an apt quote, or part of an illuminating yarn.

The Great Fire itself is the least of it. On the frigid night of Dec. 16, 1835, the blaze broke out in a dry-goods store on tiny Merchant Street near Hanover Square. It raged for 10 hours, eventually destroying 17 city blocks—674 buildings plus several ships at the South Street wharf. Only two people died, but millions in goods were consumed; even imported silks and other stock rescued from shops burned up in huge piles in the gutters.

The recovery was prompt and spectacular. Mr. Levy reanimates the New York that rose from the ashes with all its ambitions, corruption, riotous hatreds, contradictions and achievements.

Race and despised immigrants were flash points, especially because native-born New Yorkers feared that freed slaves and immigrants would take their jobs. The city was full of nativist gangs and their Irish counterparts—the Plug Uglies and Dead Rabbits, the True Blue Americans and the O'Connell Guards, the Shirt Tails and the Roach Guards. They routinely battled their foes and each other. So did the roisterous fire companies and their followers.

And there was always a strain of sympathy for the slave-holding South because of the lucrative connection between New York banks and brokers and the Cotton Kingdom. But the city was also a bastion of the abolitionist cause, championed by figures like the merchant Tappan brothers and pastors led by Henry Ward Beecher.

As the Civil War unfolded, the draft riots exploded. Well-to-do New Yorkers could buy substitutes for \$300, which infuriated workers who couldn't. In July of 1863, enraged nativist and immigrant mobs killed and mutilated blacks, pillaged the homes and businesses of abolitionists, even burned down the Colored Orphan Asylum at Fifth Avenue and 44th Street. For protection, the Times had to arm staffers with rifles and installed Gatling guns on its roof.

If the draft riots were one of the darkest episodes in New York's history, the creation of Central Park—843 acres in the heart of Manhattan lovingly sculpted by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux—was one of its most transcendent. Realizing that the booming, gridded city had left the scantiest natural refuge for its citizens, visionary leaders of the 1850s pushed through the plan, the biggest public works project in America. By the end of the Civil War, the park was attracting 7 million visitors a year. The park, Mr. Levy writes, "established a vast and permanent escape from the frenetic pace of a metropolis seemingly never at peace."

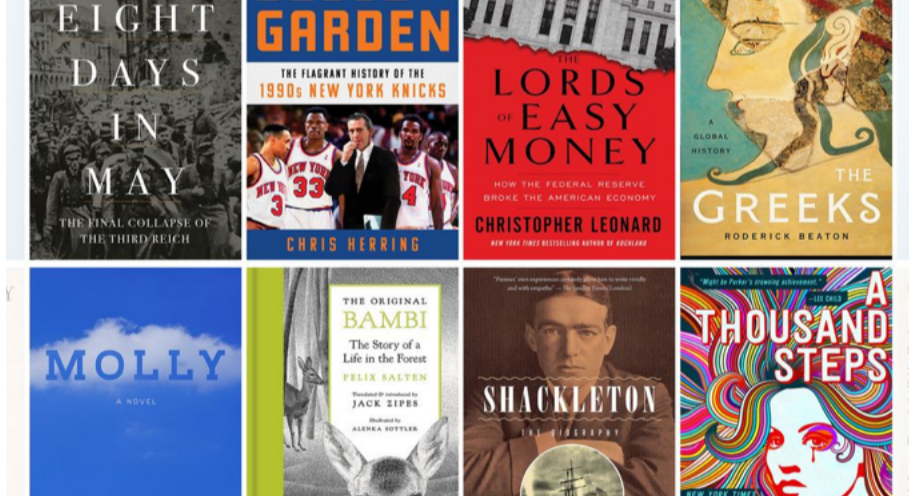
Try to imagine today's crime- and plague-ridden Manhattan without it.

Mr. Kosner was the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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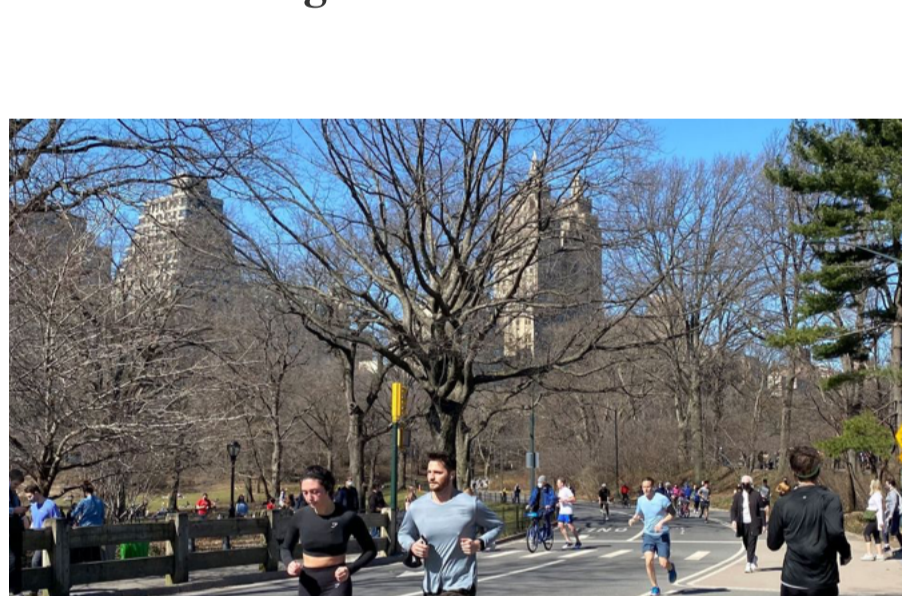


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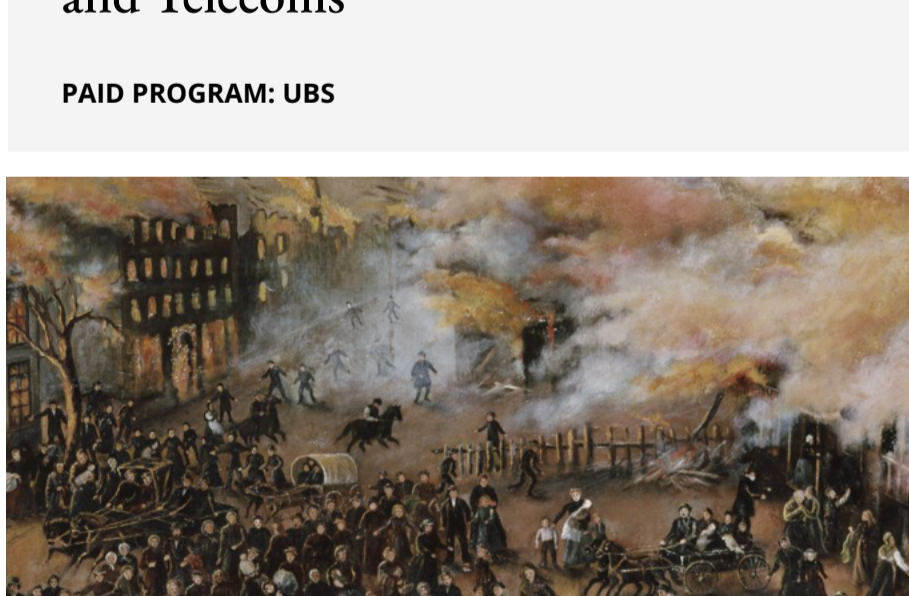


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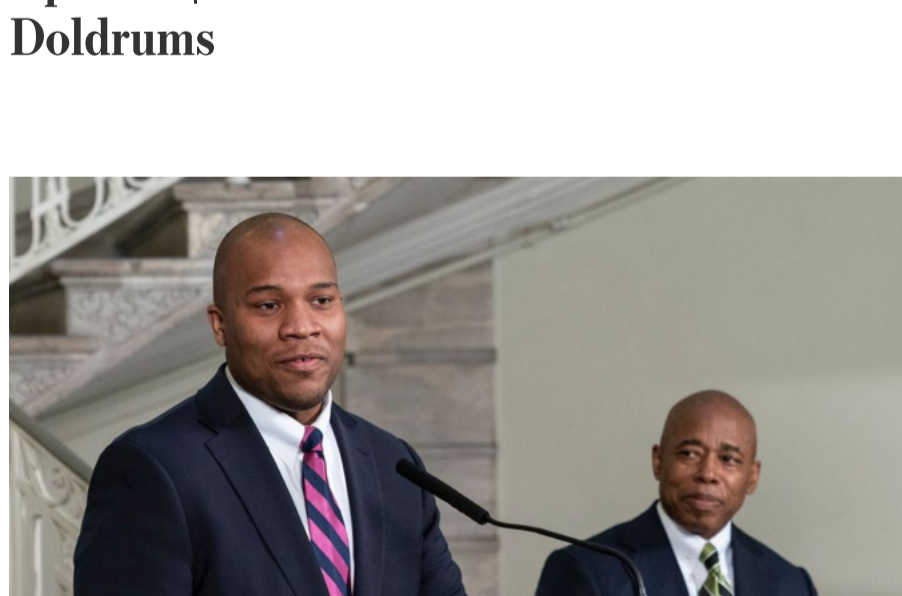
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